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FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7453  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNMCT/MCC THRESHOLD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 0568  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1565  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 0447  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0210  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0148  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE PRIORITY  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1954  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1333  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BISHKEK 000766

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SUBJECT: LITTLE TENSION IN RUN-UP TO MAY 27 OPPOSITION  
DEMO, BUT POTENTIAL FOR PROBLEMS REMAINS

REF: BISHKEK 626

Classified By: DCM Donald Lu, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Four days before the large opposition demonstration planned for May 27 in central Bishkek, tensions are noticeably lower than in the run-up to the April 29 opposition protest (reftel). Opposition leaders have in recent days backed away from an earlier vow to call for President Bakiyev's resignation, and have said that the protest will last no more than one day. Nevertheless, the government is reacting in its typical Soviet fashion - on May 22 the government announced it would hold a celebration of Border Guards Day, at the same time and place as the planned demonstration - opening the door to a possible confrontation. The Minister of Internal Affairs also told the Embassy that he was concerned about the possibility of violence on May 27, and asked the Embassy to reach out to the opposition to urge restraint. However, on May 23, the Interior Minister told the Ambassador that he would shortly begin talks with the opposition to ensure a peaceful demonstration, and opposition leaders told PolOff they will work with the MVD to find a compromise solution. END SUMMARY.

OPPOSITION: BIG NUMBERS, MODEST PLANS  
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12. (SBU) Opposition leaders in recent days have stated publicly their intention to bring up to 45,000 demonstrators onto Bishkek's main square (Ala-Too Square) on May 27 in support of opposition demands. Although these numbers are certainly exaggerated, opposition leader and former Speaker of Parliament Omurbek Tekebayev told the Ambassador that the opposition hopes to bring out "one and half times" as many people as appeared on the square on April 29 (NOTE: According to Embassy and press estimates, between 6,000-8,000 opposition protesters demonstrated on April 29. The opposition claimed "no less than 20,000, while official Kyrgyz government estimates put the number at 15,000-17,000. END NOTE).

13. (C) Nevertheless, opposition leaders in recent days have

backed away from some of their more inflammatory demands. Tekebayev told the press on May 22 that they will not demand Bakiyev's resignation, as Tekebayev had earlier vowed. Tekebayev also told the Ambassador that there will be no more demonstrations following this one until the fall, because "we can't just keep gathering and doing nothing if there are no results." Opposition leader and Parliamentarian Kubatbek Baibolov expressed the same sentiments, telling the Ambassador that he would support the demonstration only reluctantly, because the demonstrations were having no effect on President Bakiyev. Baibolov, Tekebayev and other opposition leaders have notably not made the dire predictions of bloodshed that Post heard frequently in the weeks and days leading up to April 29.

14. (C) Opposition leader Almaz Atambayev told PolOff that the opposition would not initiate any kind of violence on May 27, and would not storm the White House. Reverting back to his usual bluster, however, Atambayev said that if the government provokes a violent clash with the opposition, "we won't be able to hold our people back, and President Bakiyev won't be president anymore after May 27."

BUT POTENTIAL FOR TROUBLE REMAINS  
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15. (C) However, the government nevertheless seems intent on spoiling opposition plans. On May 22, the Defense Minister - taking a tried-and-true tactic from the Akayev playbook - announced that the Ministry of Defense would celebrate Armed Forces and Border Guards Day with a concert and ballroom dancing contest on Ala-Too Square on May 27 (despite the fact

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that Armed Forces and Border Guards Day is on May 28). The Minister claimed that the event had been in the works for months, and said the opposition would have to hold its demonstration elsewhere.

16. (SBU) On May 23, civil society leader and protest organizer Asiya Sassykbayeva told PolOff that the opposition had decided to forge ahead with its plans to demonstrate on Ala-Too Square, regardless of the government-sponsored concert. She said organizers had agreed late on May 22 (following the MOD announcement) that the protest will begin at 1100 on May 27, and if the concert is not finished by then, demonstrators "will stand by and watch the concert, then begin the protest when the concert ends." Atambayev later outlined to PolOff essentially the same plans. Sassykbayeva dismissed concerns over a potential clash between demonstrators and police forces trying to prevent them from reaching the square, claiming that the opposition and MVD "will work everything out in advance, just like we did for April 29." Head of the opposition Ar-Namys party Emil Aliyev outlined the same scenario, and said the opposition would "under no circumstances" back away from plans to hold the demonstration on Ala-Too square. However, Aliyev also said he was unconcerned over the potential for violence.

17. (C) But even before the Defense Minister announced plans to hold the concert on May 27, some in the government appeared worried about the potential for violence on May 27. The Interior Minister approached the RSO at a funeral on May 19 and asked the Embassy to approach the opposition and call for restraint on May 27. The RSO told the Minister that it was standard Embassy policy to always urge restraint on both sides. However, when the RSO called mid-level MVD contacts to inquire about plans for May 27, MVD officials were unaware of MOD plans to hold a concert on the square on May 27, despite the fact the MOD announcement was clearly meant to draw a line in the sand for the opposition.

18. (C) Nevertheless, during a chance encounter with the Ambassador on the steps of the White House on May 23, Sutalinov said he would begin talks with opposition leaders

on May 24 in an effort to ensure a peaceful May 27. He said the MOD concert would end by 1100, at which time demonstrators would take to the square. Sutalinov was unconcerned about the possibility of a clash between police forces and demonstrators, but said he couldn't rule out the possibility of an extremist group such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) disrupting the demonstration in order to cause instability in the country. Sutalinov said police had recently arrested a deputy imam in Jalalabad Oblast for possession of explosives, and cited this as the basis for his concern about extremists.

19. (C) COMMENT: There is no question that tensions in Bishkek are markedly lower than during the run-up to the April 29 demonstration, with neither side making the kinds of dire predictions that we heard frequently in the weeks before April 29. Nevertheless, neither the government nor the opposition appear willing at this point to back away from their plans to be present at the square on May 27, increasing the likelihood of some kind of showdown in the days before or on May 27. It's unfortunate that the government chose this path ) the Defense Minister's claim that the Armed Forces Day celebration had been in the works for month was a lie no one in Bishkek believes. Scheduling concerts, children's events and the like at the same time as opposition events is an old Akayev trick. Fortunately, the Interior Minister and his First Deputy are trusted by the opposition, and seem genuinely interested in avoiding any kind of violence on May 27. The Interior Minister's statement that he will meet with the opposition regarding the sequence of events on May 27 is also reassuring. As they have so many times in the past, the Kyrgyz will likely salvage a peaceful conclusion from a

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potentially conflict-ridden situation, although there are likely to be some tense moments in the coming days.  
YOVANOVITCH